

"Love"—A Short Story by Theodore Dreiser

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AS GARRISON left this last business conference in K—, where the tall buildings, and the amazing crowds always seemed such a commentary on the power and force and wealth of America and the world, and was on his way to the railway station to take a train for G—, his home city, his thoughts turned with peculiar emphasis and hope, if not actually pleasure—and yet it was a pleasure, of a sad, distressed kind—to Idelle. Where was she now? What was she doing at this particular moment—it was after 4 of a gray November afternoon; just the time, as he well knew, winter or summer, when she so much preferred to be glowing at an afternoon reception, a "the dante," or a hotel grill where there was dancing, and always, as he well knew, in company with those vivid young "sports" or pleasure lovers of the town who were always following her. Idelle, to do her no injustice, had about her that something, even after three years of marriage, that drew them, some of the worst or best—mainly the worst, he thought at times—of those who made his home city, the great far-flung G—, interesting and in the forefront socially and in every other way.

What a girl! What a history! And how strange that he should have been attracted to her at all, he with his forty-eight years, his superior (oh, very much!) social position, his conservative friends and equally conservative manners. Idelle was so different, so boyish, almost coarse, in her ways at times, actually gross and vulgar (derived from her French tanner father, no doubt, not her sweet, retiring Polish mother), and yet how attractive, too, in so many ways, with that rich russet-brown-gold hair of hers, her brown-black eyes, almost pupil-less, the iris and pupil being of the same color, and that trig, vigorous figure, always tailored in the smartest way! She was a paragon—to him at least—or had been to begin with.

How tingling and dusty these streets of K— were, so vital always! How sharply the taxis of this mid-Western city turned corners!

But what a period he had endured since he had married her, three years before! What tortures, what despair! If only he could make over Idelle to suit him! But what a wonderful thing that destroying something called beauty was, especially to one, like himself, who found life tiresome in so many ways—something to possess, a showpiece against the certain inroads of time, something wherewith to arouse envy in other persons.

At last they were reaching the station!

She did not deserve that he should love her. It was the most unfortunate thing for him that he did, but how could he help it now? How overcome it? How punish her for her misdeeds to him without punishing himself more? Love was such an inscrutable thing; so often one lavished it where it was not even wanted. God, he could testify to that! He was a fine example, really. She cared about as much for him as she did for the lamp-post on the corner, or an old discarded pair of shoes. And yet—He was never tired of looking at her, for one thing, of thinking of her ways, her moods, her secrets. She had not done and was not doing as she should—it was impossible, he was beginning to suspect, for her so to do—and still—

He must stop and send her a telegram before the train left! What a pleasure it was, indeed, anywhere and at all times, to have her hanging on his arm, to walk into a restaurant or drawing room and to know that of all those present none had a more attractive wife than he, not one. For all Idelle's commonplace birth and lack of position to begin with, she was the smartest, the best dressed, the most alluring, by far—at least, he thought so—of all the set in which he had placed her. Those eyes! That hair! That graceful figure, always so smartly arrayed! To be sure, she was a little young for him. Their figures side by side were somewhat incongruous—he with his dignity and years and almost military bearing, as so many told him, she with that air of extreme youthfulness and lure which always brought so many of the younger set to her side wherever they happened to be. Only there was the other galling thought: That she did not wholly belong to him and never had. She was too interested in other men, and always had been. Her youth, that wretched past of hers, had been little more than a lurid streak of bad, even evil—yes, evil—conduct. She had, to tell the truth, been a vile girl, sensual, selfish, inconsiderate, unrepentant, and was still, and yet he had married her in spite of that, knowing it really. Only at that he had not known quite all.

"Yes, all three of these! And wait till I get my sleeper ticket!"

No wonder people had talked, though. He had heard it—that she had married him for his money, position, that he was too old, that it was a scandal, etc. Well, maybe it was. But he had been fond of her—terribly so—and she of him, or seemingly, at first. Yes, she must have been—her manner, her enthusiasm, if temporary, for him! Those happy, happy first days they spent together! Her quiet assumption of the rôle of hostess in Steward Avenue at first, her manner of receiving and living up to her duties! It was wonderful, so promising. Yes, there was no doubt of it; she must have cared for him a little at first. Her brain, too, required a man of his years to understand some phases of her moods and ideas, and as for him—well, he was as crazy about her then as now—more so, if anything—or was he? Wasn't she just as wonderful to him now as she had been then? Truly, yes, love or infatuation of this kind

was a terrible thing, so impossible to overcome.

"Car three, section seven!"

Would he ever forget the night he had first seen her being carried into the Mercy General on that canvas ambulance stretcher, her temple bruised, one arm broken and internal injuries for which she had to be operated on at once—a torn diaphragm, for one thing—and of how she had instantly fascinated him? Her hair was loose and had fallen over one shoulder, her hands limp. Those hands! That picture! He had been visiting his old friend Dr. Dorsey and had wondered who she was, how she came to be in such a dreadful accident and thought her so beautiful. Think of how her beauty might have been marred, only it wasn't, thank goodness!

His telegram should be delivered in one hour, at most—that would reach her in time!

Then and there he had decided that he must know her if she did not die, that perhaps she might like him as he did, or the instant; had actually suffered tortures for fear she would not! Think of that! Love at first sight for him—and for one who had since caused him so much suffering—and in her condition, torn and bruised and near to death! It was wonderful, wasn't it?

How stuffy these trains were when one first entered them—coal smoky!

And that operation! What a solemn thing it was, really, with only himself, the doctor and three nurses in the empty operating room that night. Dorsey was so tall, so solemn, but always so courageous. He had asked if he might not be present, although he did not know her, and because there were no relatives about to bar him out, no one to look after her or to tell who she was, the accident having occurred after midnight in the suburbs, he had been allowed by Dorsey to come in.

"Yes, put them down here!"

He had pulled on a white slip over his business suit, and clean white cotton gloves on his hands, and had then been allowed to come into the observation gallery while Dorsey, assisted by the hospital staff, had operated on her. He saw her cut open—the blood—heard her groan heavily under ether! The pity of it—the fear he had felt that she might not come! How the memory of her sweet, pretty face, hidden then under bandages and a gas cone, had haunted him!

The train on this other track, its windows all polished, its dining car tables set and its lamps already glowing!

That was another of those fool dreams of his love and happiness that had tortured him so of late. From the first, almost without quite knowing it, he had been bewitched, stricken with this fever, and could not possibly think of her dying. And afterward, with her broken arm set and her torn diaphragm mended, he had followed her into the private room which he had ordered and had charged to himself (Dorsey must have thought it queer!), and then had waited so restlessly at his club until the next morning, when, standing beside her bed, he had said: "You don't know me, but my name is Garrison—Upham Bratner Garrison. Perhaps you know of our family here in G—, the Willard Garrisons. I saw you brought in last night. I want to be of service to you if I may, to notify your friends, and be of any other use that I can. May I?"

How well he remembered saying that, formulating it all beforehand, and then being so delighted when she accepted his services with a peculiar quizzical smile—that odd, evasive glance of hers!

Men struck car wheels this way, no doubt, in order to see that they were not broken, liable to fly to pieces when the train was running fast and so destroy the lives of all!

And then she had given him her address—her mother's, rather, to whom he went at once, bringing her back with him. And the flowers he had sent, and the fruit, and the gifts generally, everything he thought she might like! And then that queer friendship with Idelle afterward, his quickly realized dream of bliss when she had let him call on her daily, not telling him anything of herself, of course, evading him rather, and letting him think what he would, just tolerating him! Yes, she had played her game fair enough, no doubt, only he was so eager to believe that everything was going to be perfect with them—smooth, easy, lasting bliss always. What a fool of love he really was!

What a disgusting fat woman coming in with all her bags! Would this train never start!

At that time—how sharply it had burned itself into his memory!—he had found her living as a young widow with her baby daughter at her mother's, only she wasn't a widow really. It was all make-believe. Already she had proved a riant scuffer at the conventions, a wastrel, only then he did not know that. Where he thought he was making an impression on a fairly unsophisticated girl, or at least one not roughly used by the world, in reality he was merely a new sensation to her, an incident, a convenience, something to lift her out of a mood or a dilemma in which she found herself. Although he did not know it then, one of two things would happen: either she would kill her via that automobile accident, and she had wished peace, escape from her own thoughts and the attentions of her two ardent wooers, for the time being, anyhow. But there were others, or had been before them, a long line apparently of almost disgusting—but no, he could not say quite that—creatures with whom she had been—well, why say it? And he had fancied for

the moment that he was the big event in her life—or might be! He!

But even so, what difference did all that make either, if only she would love him now? What would he care who or what she was, or what she had done before, if only she really cared for him as much as he cared for her—or half as much—or even a minute portion! But Idelle could never care for any one really, or at least not for him, or him alone, anyway. She was too restless, too fond of variety in life. Had she not, since the first six or seven months in which she had known and married him, little more than tolerated to endure him? She did not really need to care for anybody; they all cared for her, sought her.

At last they were going!

Too many men of station and means—far more clever and fascinating in every way than he would ever be (or she would think so because she really liked a gayer, smarter type than he had ever been or ever could be now)—vied with him for her interest, and had with each other before ever he came on the scene. She was, in her queer

back and marry him, although each of them was married now!

That flock of crows flying across that distant field!

Of course, Idelle laughed at it, or pretended to. She pretended to be faithful to him, to tell him all this was unavoidable gossip, the aftermath of a disturbing past, before ever she saw him. But could he believe her? Was she not really planning so to do—leave him and return to J—C—, this time legally? How could he tell? But think of the vagaries of human nature and character, the conniving and persuasive power of a man of wealth like J—C—. He had left his great business in B— to come here to G— in order to be near her, perhaps—with his pleas and crazy fascination and adoration when she was now safely and apparently happily married! Think of the strangeness, the shame, the peculiarity of Idelle's earlier life! And she still insisted that this sort of thing was worth while! All his own station and wealth and adoration were not enough—because he could not be eight or ten peo-

ple seemed to end so favorably—he having been able to win and marry her—still in reality it had ended most disastrously, she having eventually left him as she did. Jessica, too, was like Idelle in so many ways, as young, as gay, as forceful, nearly as pretty, if not quite, but not with Idelle's brains. You had to admit that in connection with Idelle. She had more brains, force, self-reliance, intuition, than most women he knew anything about, young or old.

But to return to Jessica. At first she seemed to think he was wonderful, a man of the world, clever, witty, a lover of light, frivolous, foolish things, such as dancing, drinking, talking idle nonsense, which he was not at all. Yes, that was where he had always failed, apparently, and always would. He was not a man of flare.

That flock of pigeons on that barn roof!

That was the trouble really—at the bottom he had always been slow, romantic, philosophic, meditative, while trying in the main to appear something else, whereas other men, at least those

he hoped to appear as somebody, was always doing and liking.

These poor countrymen, always loitering about their village station!

And the women they ran with were just like them, like Jessica, like Idelle—smart, showy and liked that sort of man—and so—

Well, he had pretended to be all that and more, when she (Jessica) had appeared out of that gay group, petite, blond (Idelle was darker), vivacious, drawn to him by his seeming reality as a man of the world and a gay cavalier. She had actually fallen in love with him at sight, as it were, or seemed to be at the time—she!—and then, see what had happened! Those awful months in G— after she had returned with him! The agonies of mind and body!

If only that stout travelling man in that gray suit would cease staring at him! It must be the horn-rimmed glasses he had on which interested him so! These mid-Western people!

Instantly almost, only a few weeks after they were married, she seemed to realize that she had made a mis-

suasive tones had talked about the immense folly of attempting to adjust natural human antipathies, the sadness of all human inharmonies, the value of quiet in all attempts at separation, the need he had to look after his own social prestige in G—, and the like, until finally Caldwell had persuaded him to accept a decree of desertion in some Western state in silence and let her go out of his life forever! Think of that!

The first call for dinner! Perhaps he had better go at once and have it over with! He wanted to retire early tonight!

But Jessica—how she had haunted him for years after that! The whole city seemed to suggest her at times, even after he heard that she was married again and the mother of two children, so strong was the feeling for anything one lost. Even to this day certain corners in G—, the Brindingham, where they had lived temporarily at first; Mme. Gateley's dress-making establishment, where she had had her gowns made, and the Tussockville entrance to the park—always touched and hurt him like some old, dear, poignant melody.

How this train lurched as one walked! The crashing couplings between these cars!

And then, after all these busy, sobering years, in which he had found out that there were some things he was not and could not be—a gay, animal man of the town, for instance; a "blood," a waster, and some things that he was—a fairly capable financial and commercial man, a lover of literature of sorts, and of horses, a genial and acceptable person in many walks of society—had come Idelle.

Think of the dining car being crowded thus early! And such people!

He was just settling down to a semi-resigned acceptance of himself as an affectional, emotional failure in so far as women were concerned, when she had come—Idelle—this latest storm which had troubled him so much. Idelle had brains, beauty, force, insight—more than Jessica ever had had, or was he just older?—and that was what made her so attractive to men, so indifferent to women, so ready to leave him to do all the worshipping. She could understand him, apparently, at his time of life, with his sober and in some ways sad experiences and sympathize with him most tenderly when she chose, and yet, strangely enough, she could ignore him also and be hard, cruel, indifferent. The way she could neglect him at times—go her own way! God!

Not a bad seat, only now it was too dark to see anything outside! These heavy forks!

But to return to that dreadful pagan youth of hers, almost half-savage: Take that boy who shot himself at the age of sixteen for love of her, and all because she would not run away with him, not caring for him at all or she would have gone! What a sad case that was! And those other two youths, one of whom had embezzled \$10,000 and spent it on her and several other boys and girls, and that other one who had stolen five hundred in small sums from his father's till and safe and then wasted it on her and her companions at country inns until he was caught. Those country clubs! Those little rivers she described, with their canoes and the automobiles of these youths—the dancing, drinking, eating life under the moon in the warmth of spring and summer under the trees! And he had never had anything like that, never! When one of the boys, being caught, complained of her to his parents as the cause of his evil ways she denied it, so she said, and did to this day, saying she really did not know he was stealing the money and calling him coward or cry-baby. Idelle told him of this several years ago as though it had some humorous aspects, as possibly it had, to her—who knows?—but with some remorse, too, for she was not wholly indifferent to the plight of these youths, although she contended that what she had given them of her time and youth and beauty was ample compensation. Yes, she was a bad woman, just the same, or had been—a bad girl, say what one would, a child of original evil impulse. One could not deny that really. But what fascination also, even yet, and then no doubt—terrible! He could understand the fascination of those youths, their recklessness. There was something about sheer beauty, evil though it might be, which overcame moral prejudices or scruples. It had done so in him, or why was he living with her? Why? Why?

How annoying to have a train stop at a station while you were eating!

Beauty, beauty, beauty! How could one guinea the charm or avoid the lure of it? Not he, for one. Trig, beautiful women, those who carried themselves with an air and swing and suggested by their every movement: The church bells might ring and millions of religiousists preach of a life hereafter with a fixed table of rewards and punishments, but what did any one know of the future, anyhow? Nothing! Exactly nothing, in spite of all the churches. Life appeared and disappeared again; a green door opened and you went, via a train wreck, for instance, on a night like this. All these farmers here tilling their fields and where would they be in forty or fifty years, with all their moralities? No, here and now was life, here and now beauty—here and now Idelle, or creatures like her and Jessica.

He would pay his bill and go into the smoker for a change. It would be pleasant to sit there until his berth was made up.

Then, take that affair of the banker's son, young Gratiot it was, whom he knew well even now here in G—, only Gratiot did not know that he knew—or did he? Perhaps he was still friendly with Idelle, although she denied it. You could never really believe her. He it was, according to her, who had captured her fancy with his fine airs and money and car when she was only seventeen, and then robbed her (or could you call it robbery in Idelle's case, seeking, restless creature that she was?) of her indifferent innocence.

Those fascinating coke ovens blazing in the dark beside the track, mile after mile!

Somehow her telling him these things at first, or rather shortly after they were married and when she was going to make a clean breast of everything and lead a better life, had thrown a wonderful glamour over her past.

"Gay Stories"! What a name for a magazine! And that stout old travelling man reading it!

What a strange thing it was to be a girl like that—with passions and illusions like that! Perhaps, after all, life only came to those who sought it with great strength and natural gifts. But how hard it was on those who hadn't anything of that kind! Nevertheless, people should get over the follies of their youth—Idelle should, anyhow. She had had enough, goodness knows. She had been one of the worst—hence, vastly excited about life irresponsible—and she should have sobered by now. Why not? Look at all he had to offer her! Was that not enough to effect a change? While it made her interesting at times, this leftover enthusiasm, still it was so ridiculous, and made her non-desirable, too, as either a wife or mother. Yet no doubt that was what had made her so fascinating to him, too, at this late day and to all those other men in B— and elsewhere—that blazing youthfulness. Strange as it might seem, he could condone Idelle's dreadful deeds even now, just as her mother could, if she would only behave herself, if she would only love him and him alone—but would she? She seemed so determined to bend everything to her service, regardless.

No use! He couldn't stand these travelling men in this smoking room! He must have the porter make up his berth!

And then had come J—C—, the one who was still hanging about her now, the one with whom she had had that dreadful affair in B—, that always depressed him so much to think about. Of course, there was one thing to be said in extenuation of that, if you could say anything at all—which you couldn't really—and that was that Idelle was no longer a good girl then, but experienced and with all her blaring disposition aroused. She had captured the reins of her life then and was doing as she pleased—only why couldn't he have met her then instead of J—C—? His own life had always been so empty. When she had confessed so much of all this to him afterward—not this J—C— affair exactly, but the other things—why hadn't he left her then? He might have and saved himself all this agony—or could he have then? He was twice her age when he married her and knew better, only he thought he could reform her—or did he? Was that the true reason? Could he admit the true reason to himself?

"Yes, make it up right away, if you will!" Now he would have to wait about and be bored!

But to come back to the story of J—C— and all that hectic life in B—. J—C—, it seems, had been one of four or five very wealthy young managing vice-presidents of the Iverson-Cantelara Frog and Switch Company, of B—, and Idelle, because her father had suddenly died after her affair with young Gratiot, never knowing a thing about it, and her mother, not knowing quite what to do with her, had (because Idelle seemed to wish it) sent her to stay with a sister in B—, only the sister having to leave for a time shortly after Idelle reached town. G— to B— had, at Idelle's suggestion apparently, suggested that she stay with her until the aunt's return, and Idelle had then persuaded her mother to agree to this.

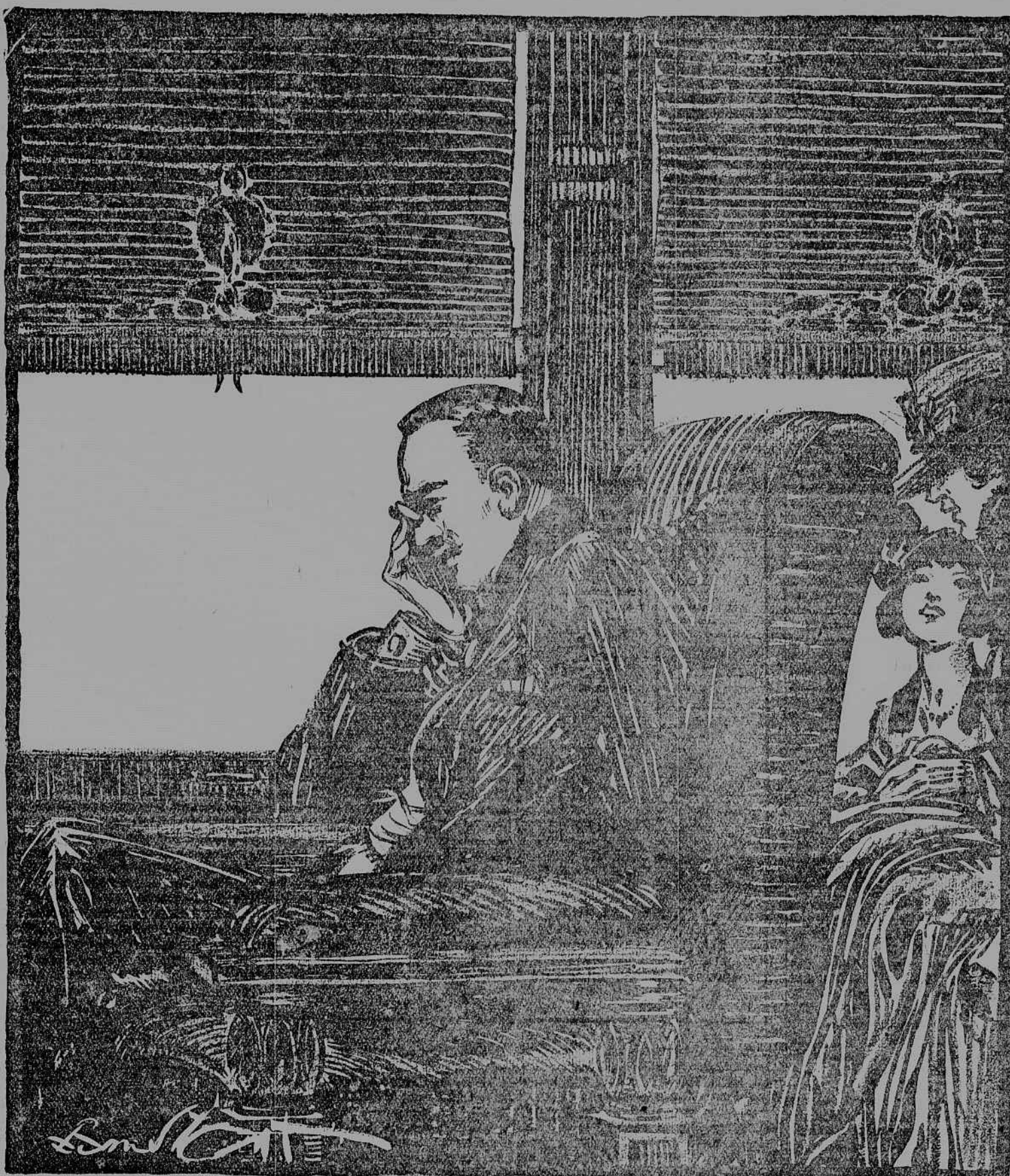
That tall, lanky girl having to sleep in that upper berth opposite! European sleeping cars were so much better!

Her girl friend was evidently something like Idelle, or even worse. At any rate, Idelle appeared to have been able to wind her around her finger. Through her he had found some method of being introduced to (or letting them introduce themselves) a few of these smart new-rich men of the town, among them two of these same vice-presidents, one of whom was J—C—. According to Idelle, he was a lavish and even reckless spender, wanting it to appear generally that he could do anything and have anything that money could buy, and liking to be seen in as many as a dozen public places in one afternoon or evening, especially at week ends, only there weren't so many in B— at the time.

This must be Centerfield, the small capital of E—, they were now passing without a pause! These through expresses cut so many large cities!

From the first, so Idelle said, he had made violent love to her, though he was already married (unhappily, of course), and she, caring nothing for the conventions and not being of the kind that obeys any laws (willful, passionate, reckless), had received him

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"Only sixty-eight miles more! If she were not there now, as she promised."

way, a child of fortune, of genuine, really. Life would use her well for some time yet, whatever she did to him or any other person, or whatever he sought to do to her in revenge, if he ever did. She was far too attractive yet, too clever, too errant, too indifferent, too spiritually free, to be neglected by any one yet, let alone by such seeking, avid, pleasure lovers as always followed her. And because she wouldn't allow him to interfere (that was the basis on which she had agreed to marry him, her personal freedom) she had always been able to go and do and be what she chose, nearly, just as she was going and doing now.

These wide yards and that truck of shabby yellow-and-black houses, begrimed and dirty externally and internally no doubt, with souls nearly as drab in them, perhaps. How much better it was to be rich like himself and Idelle; only she valued her station so lightly!

Always, wherever he went these days, and his affairs prevented him from being with her very much, she was in his mind—what she was doing, where she was going, with whom she might be, the sickening thought, with whom she might be now, and where—preserved and his yacht; or Browne, equally young and still in evidence, though deserted by her to marry him, Garrison; or J—C—, with whom Idelle had had that highly offensive affair in B— five years before, when she was only eighteen. Eighteen! The wonder year! He, too, was here in G— now after all these years, this same J—C—, and after Idelle had left him once! Yes, he was hanging about her again, wanting her to come

ple at once, no doubt. But why should he worry? Why not let her go? To the devil with her, anyhow! They merely pretended to love him in her idle, wanton spirit, because she could—well, because she could play at youth and love!

Barkerburg—a place of 50,000, and the train not stopping! The sick, breaking through for just one peep after this gray day, under those trees!

The trouble with his life, as Garrison now saw it, was that throughout it for the last twenty years, and before that even, in spite of his youth and money, he had been craving the favor of just such a young, gay, vigorous, attractive creature as Idelle or Jessica—she of his earlier years—in the way of womanhood and not realizing it to any degree commensurate with his desire, which had, of course, placed him at a disadvantage in dealing with women like them. Years before—all of fourteen now, think of it!—there had been that affair between himself and Jessica, daughter of the rich and fashionable B—'s, of Lexington, which had ended so disastrously for him. He had been out there on Colonel Lodgebrook's estate attending to some property which belonged to his father when she had crossed his path at the colonel's house, that great estate in Kentucky. Then, for the first time really, he had realized the delight of having a truly beautiful girl interested in him, and him alone, of being really attracted to him—for a little while. It was wonderful.

The smothered clang of that crossing bell!

But also what a failure! How painful to hark back to that, and yet how could he avoid it? Although it

who were so successful with women, were hard and gay and quick and thoughtless, or so he thought. They said and did things more by instinct than he ever could, were successful—well, just because they were what they were. You couldn't do those things by just trying to. And gay, pretty, fascinating women, such as Idelle or Jessica, the really worthwhile ones, seemed to realize this instinctively and to like that kind and no other. When they found a sober and reflective man like himself, or one even inclined to be, they drew away from him. Yes, they did; not consciously always, but just instinctively. They wanted only men who tingled and sparkled and glittered like themselves. To think that love must always go by blind instinct instead of merit—genuine, adoring passion!

This must be Phillipsburg coming into view! He couldn't mistake that high, round water tower!

Ah, the tragedy of seeing and knowing this and not being able to remedy it, of not being able to make one's self over into something like that! Somehow, Jessica had been betrayed by his boy-fire resemblance to the thing which she took him to be. He was a boy-fire and nothing more, in so far as she was concerned, all she thought he was. Yet because he was so hungry, no doubt, for a woman of her type he had pretended that he was "the real thing," as she so liked to describe a gay character, a "sport," a man of habits, bad or good, as you choose; one who liked to gamble, shoot, race, and do a lot of things which he really did not care for at all, but which the crowd or group with which he was always finding himself, or with whom

take. It seemed not to make the slightest difference to her, after the first week or so, that they were married or that he was infatuated with her or that he was who he was or that he every move and thought were beautiful to him. On the contrary, it seemed only to irritate her all the more. She seemed to sense then—not before—that he was really the one man not suited to her by temperament or taste or ideas, not the kind she imagined she was getting, and from then on there were the most terrible days, terrible—

That pretty girl turning in at that village gate!

Trying, depressing, degrading, really. What dark frowns used to flash across her face like clouds at that time—she was nineteen to his twenty-four, and so pretty!—the realization, perhaps, that she had made a mistake. What she really wanted was the gay, anachronistic, unthinking, energetic person he had seemed to be under the stress of the life at Lodgebrook's, not the quiet, reasoning, dreamy person he really was. It was terrible!

Tall trees made such shadowy aisles at evening!

Finally she had run away, disappeared completely one morning after telling him she was going shopping, and then never seeing him any more—over—not even once! A telegram from B— had told him that she was going to her mother's and for him not to follow her, please; and then before he could make up his mind really what to do he had come that old wolf Caldwell, the famous divorce lawyer of G—, representing her mother, no doubt, and in smug, ingratiating per-